

WAITING TO EXHALE

How the simple act of breathing has the power to transform

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YOUNG WOMAN HOLDING FLOWERS/THINKSTOCK

Consider for a moment the things that are absolutely vital to your existence. Perhaps food, water, mobility and a healthy heart featured high on your list because we are taught from a young age how important it is to fuel and strengthen our body. While indisputable, there is one process that is so vital and natural to us that we sometimes overlook our relationship with it – our breath.

We can live for weeks without food, days without water, but only minutes without air. From the moment we are born our lungs quite literally become the trees that receive each and every breath and connect us with everything. It is therefore unsurprising that for centuries people have sought spiritual awakening, self-healing, and meditative relaxation through breathing techniques that have long been rooted in Eastern practices like yoga, qigong and tai chi. Interest in breathwork is on the rise as we search for effective, empowering alternative methods to manage stress and health challenges.

Breathwork describes any therapy using breathing exercises with the aim



of achieving greater self-awareness, an increased capacity for self-healing, and improvement in mental, physical and spiritual well-being.

In the 70s, the pioneering Rebirthing Breathwork of Leonard Orr and Holotropic Breathwork of psychiatrist Stanislav Grof led to the development of the unique techniques and methods that characterise and distinguish the various styles of breathwork today.

LIFE FORCE

One of the most therapeutic and cutting-edge breathwork systems is Transformational Breath. Developed by Dr Judith Kravitz more than 35 years ago, it has been endorsed by respected integrative medicine experts such as Deepak Chopra and Christiane Northrup. Kravitz says, "Transformational Breath is a complete self-healing system using conscious breathing to facilitate the natural healing process for all types of trauma, to gain greater physical, mental and spiritual health, and maintain optimal well-being."

In contrast to the reliance that our medical system engenders, Transformational

Breath incorporates breath analysis, body mapping, sound healing and coaching to empower the client to use tools that they have learnt on their own. American psychotherapist Dr Henry Smith Rohrberg says, "One session is equivalent to about two years of psychotherapy."

The notion of breathwork sounds both very easy and rather difficult. Our breath is always with us and yet the subtle movement of breath and the pranic flow (life-force energy) that accompanies it makes it easy to underestimate how powerful its influence is in our lives. Like our beating heart and many body functions, the respiratory process is so automatic and unconscious that even in our deepest state of sleep we continue to breathe. However, unlike other vital processes, the breath has the unique ability to be conscious and manipulated.

There are benefits to be gained from consciously applying control to the movement of the breath when we practise such techniques as yogic pranayama, however in our day-to-day lives we unknowingly limit and control the breath in response to intense physical, emotional

and mental trauma. When this happens repeatedly over a lifetime, the quality and capacity of our natural breath becomes significantly contracted and altered.

EVERY LEVEL

Does it really matter how we breathe, as long as we receive enough oxygen to stay alive? Yes. The breath influences your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being, but the opposite is also true. That is, strong physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenges significantly limit our ability to breathe fully, freely and joyously.

On a physical level, we obtain 80 per cent of our energy from the breath process. The inhaled breath feeds the cells of the entire body with oxygen and the exhaled breath detoxifies through carbon dioxide. The movement of breath stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system and the vagus nerve creating a relaxation response and balancing the flow of energy throughout the body. Effective breathing improves energy levels, blood and lymphatic circulation, along with conditions such as anxiety, respiratory diseases, headaches and depression.

Breathworkers often report their clients resolve physical illnesses after they began to integrate breathing practices into their lives. Psychologist, author and body-intelligence practitioner Dr Gay Hendricks says, "The human body is designed to discharge 70 per cent of its toxins through breathing. So if your breathing is not operating at peak efficiency, you are not ridding yourself of toxins properly." Medical research has found links between improper breathing and diseases including hypertension, heart disease and cancer.

On a mental level, conscious breathing optimises the power of mental concentration, learning capacity, observation, productivity and decision-making. Our breath provides focus and clarity to enhance awareness and presence in every moment. Try this simple exercise for yourself: close your eyes and watch your breath. Can you see how your relationship to your thoughts is influenced and how difficult it is to truly watch the coming and going of the breath while thinking at the same time?

On an emotional level, integrated breathwork provides profound inner peace

WOMAN RESTING AFTER PRACTICING YOGA AT HOME/THINKSTOCK
SERENITY AND YOGA PRACTICING/THINKSTOCK; HAPPY FREEDOM IN SUNRISE NATURE/THINKSTOCK



and relaxation, feelings of safety, self-love and acceptance. It also strengthens coping skills and sense of inner power. One of the most intriguing and profound aspects of breathwork is the intelligence with which the breath can access the subconscious mind, leading to quick and permanent

resolution of unprocessed past traumas without the need to relive or consciously process the experiences. As the breath opens, higher levels of vibration enable negative energetic patterns and imprints to be cleared and old mental and emotional patterns that no longer serve you to be

released. Patterns of resistance, cultural conditioning and self-sabotage are brought into awareness where they can be worked on directly.

On a spiritual level breathwork enhances spiritual connection, meditation practices, intuition and creativity. Awareness expands with the expression of love and joy as the heart opens and trusts the flow of life.

RELEARNING THE INNATE

Fundamental to breathwork is the premise that an individual's breath pattern offers valuable insight and is a compilation of everything that has happened in their life. When we are young and don't have the ability to physically, emotionally or verbally defend ourselves, we instinctively seek protection using the one thing we can control – our breath. Consider the quality of your breath when you are angry, upset, anxious or concentrated. These energetic contractions only become denser as we move through life's ups and downs, so that by the time we reach adulthood, our breath is shallow and limited.

BREATH/THINKSTOCK: WOMAN BREATHING DEEP FRESH AIR IN THE MORNING SUNRISE/THINKSTOCK: WOMAN SILHOUETTE BREATHING IN A COLD WINTER/THINKSTOCK: WOMAN PERFORMING RELAXATION AND MEDITATION EXERCISES AT THE BEACH/THINKSTOCK



When the breath is opened and maintained through practice, the protective patterns that served you in childhood are released and the relationship with your breath transforms. The negative thoughts and mind madness that usually arise when experiencing intense emotion now shift when we realise that full, open breath is constant support, our companion for life. In short, breathwork gets us out of our heads and into our bodies.

All breathwork therapies are based on the act of breathing. Some methods, like Transformational Breath, emphasise belly breathing for an extended period of time

using a connected, circular breath through an open mouth. While this style of breathing is not to be employed on a daily basis, the opening in the breath guides people to release emotional energy that can keep them stuck.

Our breath is the most immediate source of energy and healing for our physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Breathwork is simple, safe and can be experienced by everyone regardless of age and health. It offers an invitation to reconnect with yourself, erase limiting patterns and be open to the full, beautiful flow of life. Quite literally, when you change your breath, you change your life. 🌿